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ON PAGE 1

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NICARAGUA REBELS ACCUSED OF ABUSES

Senator Predicts Investigation of Reports of Atrocities

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 26 — Members of Congress and other Government officials say many reports of abuses by Nicaraguan rebels against civilians have come to their attention recently as a result of Congressional investigations of the C.I.A.'s manual on guerrilla warfare.

Present and former rebel leaders said in interviews over the last few weeks that some of their guerrillas had been guilty of atrocities. The leaders said they deplored the acts, and they contended that they had evidence that the Sandinistas were guilty of the same kinds of abuses.

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who is a senior member of the Select Committee on Intelligence, said the committee was likely to investigate the reports of atrocities next year.

Evidence About Crimes

In testimony to the House Select Committee on Intelligence this month, the members of Congress and other sources said, Central Intelligence Agency officials and others presented evidence that the United States-backed rebels had raped, tortured and killed unarmed civilians, including children.

The C.I.A. officials were said to have raised that problem as one explanation for the guerrilla warfare manual, saying the primer was intended to moderate the rebels' behavior. But that explanation only irritated some members of Congress, who said the agency had not told them of the problem before.

Members of Congress and the other sources said that among the reports that have come to their attention, along with the classified briefings from senior C.I.A. officials, were direct, sworn testimony from at least one rebel leader; press accounts, and reports and affidavits from private individuals and organizations that have interviewed victims and witnesses in Central America.

The reports have included accounts about groups of civilians, including women and children, who were burned, dismembered, blinded or beheaded, the sources said.

Congress ended aid to the rebels last spring but is to consider renewing aid early next year. Democratic members of Congress who are familiar with the atrocity reports said the issue was likely to bolster opposition to renewing the aid.

C.I.A. Offered Reports

Early this month, Representative Edward P. Boland, the Massachusetts Democrat who is chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, said C.I.A. officers had offered the reports of atrocities as one explanation for the agency's guerrilla warfare manual.

The C.I.A. officials, including Director William J. Casey, told the committee that "they were concerned about the stories of kidnappings and assassinations" of civilians, Mr. Boland said.

The agency published the guerrilla warfare manual so the rebels "could win the hearts and minds of the Nicaraguan population," Mr. Boland quoted the C.I.A. officers as telling his committee.

The manual advised rebels to kidnap Sandinistas, to "neutralize" selected Government officials, to blackmail ordinary citizens so they would be forced to join the rebel cause, and to hire criminals who would arrange the shooting deaths of fellow rebels so they would become martyrs. The manual also included advice on political propagandizing intended to persuade Nicaraguans to become rebel sympathizers.

Behavior Said to Improve

In separate interviews, rebel leaders said they did not know whether the number of soldiers disciplined for abuses had increased or decreased in the year since the manual was issued. But one rebel official, Bosco Matamoros, said the rebels' behavior had gradually improved over the years.

"We have a voluminous file on Sandinista atrocities" as well, Mr. Matamoros said.

He said the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest rebel group, had documented "several hundred cases" of rebel abuses against civilians in the last two years. The abuses have ranged from petty theft to murder, he said.

He and other rebel leaders described the problem as a regrettable but inevitable byproduct of civil war and added that their military courts had issued sentences ranging from demotion to imprisonment each time an abuse was discovered.

Alfonso Callejas, a member of the rebel group's directorate, said: "It is very difficult to control an irregular army. Many soldiers join because they have people they want to get even with."

Chamorro Briefed Committee

In an interview, a former rebel leader, Edgar Chamorro, said he told the House Intelligence Committee in closed testimony last month that some rebel commanders routinely executed their prisoners, even though rebel leaders found the practice "sickening and disgusting."

"The practice was common," Mr. Chamorro said, "but it definitely was not our policy."

Mr. Chamorro testified to the House Intelligence Committee for more than two hours one day in November. The other members of the rebel directorate dismissed Mr. Chamorro from the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, partly because of his public discussion of the atrocity issue.

This month, the Center for Constitutional Rights, a New York civil liberties group, gave the House Intelligence Committee more than 150 pages of written testimony gathered by its attorneys on rebel atrocities.

The center sued the Reagan Administration two years ago on behalf of a dozen Nicaraguan citizens who said they or members of their family were victims of rebel abuses.

Suit Ruled Political

In one case, the center's testimony said, the rebels "kidnapped and slit the throats of 18 peasants and burned their houses." The suit was dismissed as a "political question" beyond the jurisdiction of the Federal courts and is on appeal. This month, the center appended the C.I.A. manual and related information to its appeal, saying the information bolstered the case.

An Americas Watch report published last April says: "In the northwestern mountain areas, the F.D.N. has engaged repeatedly in kidnappings, torture and murder of unarmed civilians, mostly in villages and farm cooperatives." It cited one case last December when villagers were "tortured to death."

Several leaders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force said Sandinista Government officials and their sympathizers had been publicizing the atrocity issue.

Adolfo Calero, chairman of the F.D.N., said the Sandinistas had carried on "an orchestrated campaign to make resistance fighters appear as atrocious terrorists." He added: "We draw our very blood from the civilians they say we are killing."